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ACTIVITIES OF THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES ORGANIZATION AS A “LITMUS TEST” FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

The article deals with the history and present stage of activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization in Ukraine. The attitude and actions of a state and the majority of its population towards the activities of the Jehovahists and other non-traditional religious communities is viewed as a “litmus test,” which reveals how successfully the principle of religious freedom and freedom of conscience is implemented in public policy. It is emphasized that, unlike during the Soviet period, when the Jehovahists were persecuted for their beliefs and missionary work, a required legal framework for free development of this religion has been created in independent Ukraine with very few cases of religious intolerance against Jehovah's Witnesses and other non-traditional religions. In general, there are no complaints regarding the protection of the believers' rights in Ukraine from domestic human rights activists or foreign observers, who in recent years have hardly received any complaints about forced conversion to a different religion. The unhindered operation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine, especially in contrast to the temporarily occupied territories and some post-Soviet countries where this organization is banned (in particular, in Russia since 2017), is convincing evidence of the actual freedom of

religion in this country and, therefore, the “litmus paper” does not change its colors into the threatening ones. (Editor’s note: This article was written prior to the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 22, 2022, after which the situation may be drastically altered).

Introduction

Jehovah's Witnesses have existed in Ukraine for about a century, but Jehovahism is still not perceived by many Ukrainians as a traditional religion in our society. At the same time, the vast majority of Ukrainians have a tolerant attitude towards Jehovah's Witnesses, and there are very few cases of religious intolerance towards them in our country. The habituation effect is observed here, when this religious organization is nowadays seen as an integral part of the plural religious landscape of Ukraine. Jehovah's Witnesses were banned many times in different countries, but they were most persecuted and repressed in Nazi Germany and in the USSR during the Stalin era. In this context, we agree with the opinion expressed by Ivan Riher, Head of the Public Relations Service of Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine, that “the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses is like a litmus test. It immediately reveals the actual human rights situation in the country.”¹ Indeed, it is the situation regarding the attitude of a given state and the majority of its population towards the activities of the Jehovahists and other non-traditional religious communities that serve in many ways as a “litmus test,” which reveals how successfully the principle of religious freedom and freedom of conscience is implemented within the framework of the state policy. In this regard, the unhindered operation of Jehovah's Witnesses organization in Ukraine, especially in contrast to the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine, where the so-called “Russian world” penetrated, and in some post-Soviet countries, is convincing evidence of the actual freedom of religion in our country.

Origin and Development of the Jehovah's Witnesses Communities in the Territory of Ukraine

To understand the situation with the spread of Jehovahism in Ukraine up to 2022, it is worth at least briefly recalling the history of the development of this movement in our territories. Jehovah's Witnesses trace their history in Ukraine to the visit of Charles Taze Russell (the founder of Jehovahism) to Odessa in 1891. In 1911, he also visited Lviv as a preacher. The first communities of the Jehovahists appeared in the western regions of Ukraine in the 1920s.

¹ Одесские “Свидетели Иеговы” – о своем отношении к Covid-19, грядущем конце света и преследованиях в России [Jehovah's Witnesses in Odessa talk about their attitude to Covid-19, the coming end of the world and persecution in Russia]. *Думская*. <https://dumskaya.net/news/odesskie-svideteli-iegovy-o-svoem-otnoshenii-k-c-134741/>. Accessed 02.04.2022.

The founders of these communities in the current territory of our country were those Ukrainians who returned to their homeland from emigration to the United States and Canada. In Transcarpathia, where Jehovah's Witnesses were most active, they built three houses for meetings between the First and Second World Wars. In the interwar period, several congresses of the Jehovahists were also held in Transcarpathia, Galicia, and Volhynia. Besides the western region, very few communities of the supporters of Jehovahism operated in the territory of Soviet Ukraine from the 1920s to 1930s. Specifically, there was a community in the village of Liubymivsky Post, which was located near Kharkiv, and several small communities in Kyiv and Odessa.²

When the western Ukrainian lands became part of the USSR (Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic) in 1939, Jehovah's Witnesses were persecuted and repressed. The Soviet government did not like the pacifism of the Jehovahists, who refused to fight and, therefore, avoided, by all means, being drafted into the army. Besides, Jehovah's Witnesses did not vote in elections and kept their children from enrolling in the Pioneer and Komsomol organizations. The authorities were also worried that Jehovah's Witnesses were noticeably different from the majority of other people in everyday life, since they did not smoke, drink alcohol, or celebrate public holidays, and they had a negative attitude towards blood transfusion and meat that did not have its blood drained, etc. However, the Jehovahists were not officially persecuted in the USSR for refusing to serve in the army and other things mentioned above. More often, they were accused of anti-Soviet agitation and ties with foreign centers. Then they were arrested and exiled to remote regions of the USSR.

The persecution of the Jehovahists intensified after World War II. In particular, the biggest repressive action, directed primarily against Jehovah's Witnesses, took place in April 1951 (its code name was "Operation North," because it was aimed at the massive deportation of Jehovah's Witnesses to Siberia). The operation was authorized by the decree of the Council of Ministers of the USSR. The same decree banned the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in the USSR. On April 8, 1951, more than 6,100 members of Jehovah's Witnesses were deported from Western Ukraine to Siberia as part of "Operation North."³ The Jehovahists who escaped repression went into hiding, as they were constantly monitored by the representatives of the Soviet authorities. In June 1965, the repression against Jehovah's Witnesses in the USSR eased

² Історія Свідків Єгови в Україні [History of Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine]. *Вікіпедія*. https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/Історія_Свідків_Єгови_в_Україні. Accessed 02.05.2022.

³ Онлайн-бібліотека товариства "Вартова башта" [Watchtower Society Online Library]. *Щорічник Свідків Єгови 2002. Україна*. <https://wol.jw.org/uk/wol/d/r15/lp-k/302002012#p116>. Accessed 02.05.2022.

after the Supreme Court of Ukraine ruled that the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses was not anti-Soviet but was of a religious nature. The authorities stopped arresting people for reading this literature. In the same year, the USSR government issued a decree according to which all Jehovah's Witnesses who had been deported to Siberia in 1951 were granted freedom, but their houses and other property confiscated prior to their deportation were not returned to them. However, the Soviet government continued to persecute and imprison Jehovah's Witnesses for preaching.⁴

The repression did not break Jehovah's Witnesses. On the contrary, forced to act illegally or semi-legally for decades under constant persecution by the Soviet authorities, they created a well-organized and disciplined system in their communities under the control of a single center, which helped them not only withstand the constant confrontation, but gradually increase their numbers. It was not until 1991 that the Soviet government decided that the activities of the Jehovah's Witnesses did not pose a threat to law and order. Jehovah's Witnesses were officially registered in Ukraine on February 28, 1991. At that time, Ukraine had the largest number of Jehovah's Witnesses in the territory of the former Soviet Union: "In 1991, there were 25,448 members in 258 congregations of Ukraine and about 20,000 members in all other republics of the former USSR."⁵

Development of Jehovahism in Independent Ukraine

Throughout the existence of independent Ukraine, Jehovah's Witnesses have been persecuted at the state level for their religious beliefs and preaching. They had some problems in the first years of the independence of Ukraine due to their refusal to serve in the army. However, after the adoption in February 1992 of the Law of Ukraine "On Alternative (Non-Military) Service," this issue was gradually resolved. Article 2 of this Law stipulates: "The citizens of Ukraine have the right to alternative service if military service contradicts their religious beliefs and these citizens belong to religious organizations which operate in accordance with the legislation of Ukraine and the doctrine of which does not allow the use of weapons."⁶ In addition, Article 35 of the Constitution of Ukraine guarantees the right to

⁴ Онлайн-бібліотека товариства "Вартова башта" [Watchtower Society Online Library]. *Щорічник Свідків Єгови 2002. Україна*. <https://wol.jw.org/uk/wol/d/r15/lp-k/302002012#p221>. Accessed 02.05.2022.

⁵ Онлайн-бібліотека товариства "Вартова башта" [Watchtower Society Online Library]. *Щорічник Свідків Єгови 2002. Україна*. <https://wol.jw.org/uk/wol/d/r15/lp-k/302002012#p234>. Accessed 02.05.2022.

⁶ Закон України про альтернативну (невійськову) службу [Law of Ukraine on Alternative (Non-Military) Service]. *Верховна Рада України. Законодавство України*. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1975-12#Text>. Accessed 02.05.2022.

freedom of thought and religion. The same article guarantees the religious believers of our country the right to alternative service.⁷

Against the background of a severe economic, social, and political, moral and ethical crisis that lasted in Ukraine in the first decades after gaining independence, the number of adherents of non-traditional religions and, in particular, Jehovahism, rapidly increased. The success of various non-traditional religious movements in that period was largely due to the loss by the Orthodox and other traditional churches of their dominant role in society as a result of the long imposition of atheistic ideology during the Soviet era.⁸ The number of the Jehovahist communities, therefore, increased faster in the central, southern and eastern regions of our country, where the Soviet regime prevailed longer than in the western regions. It should be noted that in the western region, the Jehovahist communities are most common in Transcarpathia.

During the first 15 years of the existence of independent Ukraine, the number of the Jehovah's Witnesses communities increased by four times, and as of January 1, 2007, there were 1,014 communities of Jehovah's Witnesses, of which 345 operated without the state registration.⁹ Over the next few years, the increase in the number of Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine slowed down significantly, and in the last decade, this growth has virtually stopped and even reversed. In particular, according to the official state data, at the beginning of 2011 there were 1,108 Jehovah's Witnesses centers, 436 of which operated without the state registration.¹⁰ At the beginning of 2021, there were only 927 Jehovah's Witnesses centers in Ukraine, 651 of which operated without the state registration.¹¹ A slight decrease in the number of the Jehovahist communities recorded by official statistics, in our view, is primarily due to the fact that the territory of Crimea and some areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions are not currently controlled by Ukraine and, therefore, there are no official figures available from these territories.

⁷ Конституція України [Constitution of Ukraine]. *Верховна Рада України. Законодавство України*. <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/254%D0%BA/96-%D0%B2%D1%80#Text>. Accessed 02.04.2022.

⁸ І. В. Богдановський *Філософський аналіз феномену нетрадиційної релігійності: соціальний і психологічний аспекти. Монографія*. [Philosophical analysis of phenomenon of non-traditional religiosity: Social and psychological aspects. Monograph.] – Ірпінь: Видавництво Національного університету ДПСУ України, 2012. – С. 238.

⁹ Релігійні організації в Україні (станом на 1 січня 2007 р.) [Religious organizations in Ukraine (as of January 1, 2007)]. *Релігійно-інформаційна служба України (RISU)*. https://risu.ua/religiyni-organizaciji-v-ukrajini-stanom-na-1-sichnya-2007-r_n89683. Accessed 02.05.2022.

¹⁰ Звіт про мережу церков і релігійних організацій в Україні станом на 1 січня 2011 року [Report on the network of churches and religious organizations in Ukraine as of January 1, 2011]. http://loga.gov.ua/sites/default/files/collections/2011.01.01_zvit_f1.pdf. С. 24. Accessed 02.05.2022.

¹¹ Звіт про мережу релігійних організацій в Україні станом на 1 січня 2021 року [Report on the network of religious organizations in Ukraine as of January 1, 2021]. *Державна служба України з етнополітики та свободи совісті*. <https://dessa.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Form1-2021-public3.xls>. Accessed 02.05.2022.

It is important to point out that according to domestic legislation, the registration of religious organizations is not a mandatory procedure. The lack of state registration of the Jehovah's Witnesses communities is in most cases due to the reluctance of Jehovah's Witnesses themselves to officially register or renew their registration. However, non-registration in no way prevents them from carrying out their religious activities and missionary work.

The total number of adherents of the Jehovah's Witnesses organization in Ukraine, according to their own data as of 2021, slightly exceeds 129,000 people (additionally, more than 130,000 people attend their meetings from time to time). In 2021, the number of the community adherents ("baptized") in Ukraine increased by only 1,878 people.¹² It should be noted that the Jehovahists do not mention in their reports how many people left the community during the same period. If we approximate how many of the Jehovahists might die in a year, move to other countries, simply leave the community, etc. then it is easy to see that their organization in Ukraine barely grew in number in 2021. This confirms our opinion that the number of Jehovah's Witnesses in our country has largely stabilized.

The stabilization in the number of Jehovah's Witnesses is also due to a reduction in their missionary work connected with the Covid-19-related quarantine restrictions. Ivan Riher, who was already mentioned above, noted that in March 2020 Jehovah's Witnesses stopped gathering at their Kingdom Halls for worship services, which have been held online since then. They also suspended their door-to-door preaching and preaching in public places. I. Riher stressed that Jehovah's Witnesses respect the authorities that care about the wellbeing of their citizens, and they cooperate and support the government in such matters.¹³

The stabilization in the number of Jehovah's Witnesses in Ukraine is in no way related to the restriction of their missionary work by the authorities. The modern Ukrainian legislation provides all necessary conditions for missionary work, both for the activities of the local religious communities and for foreign missions. The legal aspects of such activities do not contain significant contradictions with the principle of freedom of religion and church (religious organizations), recognized by the international community. In particular, Article 10 of the Law of Ukraine "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" gives Ukrainian and foreign religious centers the right to open their missionary and charitable

¹² Звіт про служіння в країнах і територіях. 2021 рік [Report on ministry in countries and territories. 2021]. <https://www.jw.org/uk/бібліотека/книжки/2021-службовий-рік-звіт/2021-країни-території/>. *Свідки Єгови. Офіційний сайт*. Accessed 02.05.2022.

¹³ Одесские «Свидетели Иеговы» — о своем отношении к Covid-19, грядущем конце света и преследованиях в России [Jehovah's Witnesses in Odessa talk about their attitude to Covid-19, the coming end of the world and persecution in Russia]. *Думская*. <https://dumskaya.net/news/odesskie-svideteli-iegovy-o-svoem-otnoshenii-k-c-134741/>. Accessed 02.04.2022.

societies in Ukraine in order to conduct religious preaching and propagate their beliefs.¹⁴ These rights are not only declared, but also implemented in practice.

This reality does not mean that the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses and other religious communities in Ukraine are completely conflict-free. Sometimes there are cases of aggression against the individual Jehovahists and their places of worship. For example, the Report on International Religious Freedom for 2018, distributed by the Office of International Religious Freedom of the U.S. Department of State, notes that Jehovah's Witnesses had reported three cases of physical assault during 2018. In the same year, according to the Jehovahists themselves, there were 25 incidents of vandalism at the Kingdom Halls. There was arson that destroyed the Kingdom Hall in Radomyshl, Zhytomyr region, on March 25, and several cases of window smashing, insulting graffiti, etc. were recorded.¹⁵ Such acts of vandalism, however, were not the result of the policy of the Ukrainian authorities. Most of these and similar manifestations of aggression against Jehovah's Witnesses are due to the fact that the people who committed them had religious beliefs different from Jehovahism and were annoyed by the missionary work of this community.

The central Ukrainian government is indifferent to the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses and supporters of other non-traditional religious communities and does not interfere with them, which is not always the case with local authorities. It should be pointed out that in cases when Jehovah's Witnesses complained about discrimination against them by local authorities, the central authorities of Ukraine mainly proved themselves as defenders of the rights of believers. For example, on October 3, 2018, the Rivne Regional State Administration was forced to register the charter of the local organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in pursuance of a ruling by the Supreme Court of Ukraine overturning the administration's refusal in 2017 to grant a registration request. The court rejected the administration's statement that the members of the organization were not allowed to preach or study the Bible outside the Kingdom Halls because there was no legal provision prohibiting missionary work by religious groups outside their places of worship.¹⁶

¹⁴ Закон України "Про свободу совісті та релігійні організації" [Law of Ukraine "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations"]. *Верховна Рада УРСР. Закон від 23.04.1991.* <http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/987-12>. Accessed 02.05.2022.

¹⁵ Звіт про свободу віросповідання у світі за 2018 рік: Україна [Report on International Religious Freedom for 2018: Ukraine]. *Офіс з міжнародних релігійних свобод Державного Департаменту США.* https://ua.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/151/Ukraine_Religious-Freedom-report-2018-Ukr.pdf. C. 24-30. Accessed 02.04.2022.

¹⁶ Звіт про свободу віросповідання у світі за 2018 рік: Україна [Report on International Religious Freedom for 2018: Ukraine]. *Офіс з міжнародних релігійних свобод Державного Департаменту США.*

In the context of social and political events that took place in Ukraine as a result of countering aggression from Russia, which at any moment can turn from a “hybrid” into a full-fledged “hot” one.¹⁷ On request by authors some articles will be peer-reviewed, special attention is drawn to the pacifism of Jehovah’s Witnesses. The military service evasion, even on the basis of religious beliefs, is perceived by many ordinary citizens and government officials (especially employees of military commissariats, i.e. territorial recruitment centers) with suspicion and often negatively. According to Jehovah’s Witnesses, in 2020, some representatives of military commissariats detained young Jehovah’s Witnesses by force (there were about ten of them during 2020) for military service or denied them the right to alternative civilian service because they missed the deadline for filing an application for alternative service as a conscientious objector. However, we would like to emphasize that the central government took the side of the Jehovahists in this matter, as well. In particular, “On April 23, 2020, the Secretariat of the Ombudsman informed the regional state administrations that the right to alternative service is “absolute,” and therefore cannot be restricted by any time limits.”¹⁸

It should be noted that the problems faced by Jehovah’s Witnesses and most other religious organizations in the territory controlled by Ukraine cannot be compared with the problems faced by them in the territories of Ukraine temporarily occupied by Russia. The “laws” adopted in the republics, i. e. the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) were ostensibly created to regulate religious activities and are clearly discriminatory. On February 2, 2018, the People’s Council of the LPR adopted the law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations.” It states that all religious organizations, except for the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), are required to undergo a state religious examination and be re-registered by August 2, 2018. The council subsequently extended this deadline to October 15. However, the vast majority of the religious communities (not only Jehovah’s Witnesses, but also Baptists, Pentecostals, Adventists, etc.) were denied registration, citing the negative results of “religious studies examination.” As of December 2019, according to the “LPR Minister” Dmytro Sydorov, the LPR authorities registered 195 religious organizations. 188 of these 195 organizations belonged to the UOC-MP, four were Muslim and one from each was the representation of the

https://ua.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/151/Ukraine_Religious-Freedom-report-2018-Ukr.pdf. C. 11. Accessed 02.05.2022.

¹⁷ Editor’s note: This article was written prior to Feb 22, 2022, when the Russian invasion began. By the time when it is published Ukraine was ravaged by war.

¹⁸ Звіт про свободу віросповідання у світі за 2020 рік: Україна [Report on International Religious Freedom for 2020: Ukraine]. *Офіс з міжнародних релігійних свобод Державного Департаменту США*. <https://ua.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/151/2020-IRFR-Ukr.pdf>. C. 11. Accessed 02.05.2022.

Old Believers, Jews, and Roman Catholics. The situation with the observance of religious freedoms is, by no means, better in the DNR. However, the peculiarity of this republic is that not only Jehovah's Witnesses, but all the Protestant communities are subjected to repression and bans: "Religious organizations and civil society activists note that the DNR authorities continue to persecute the Protestant communities when they try to hold public religious events, even if such groups are registered in the DNR. The DNR authorities claimed that the United States could fund these activities, and it publicly stigmatized such communities as American agents."¹⁹

Following the ban of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia in 2017, authorities in the LNR and the DNR started to persecute them, as well: "On September 26, 2018, the Supreme Court of the DNR ... granted the request of the Acting Prosecutor General to ban Jehovah's Witnesses as an extremist organization. The LNR authorities imposed a similar ban earlier that year."²⁰ As a result of such discrimination, many of Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants fled the area, escaping from the oppressive conditions and seeking greater religious freedom in the territories controlled by the Ukrainian government.

The attitude towards Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea, which Russia not only occupied in 2014, but also, in violation of the international law and its own obligations, declared its own territory officially extending its laws to it, should be considered separately. Consequently, in order to understand the specifics of the situation with Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea, it should be at least briefly pointed out what is happening to this religious organization today in the Russian Federation (RF).

The first significant problem Russian Jehovah's Witnesses faced dates back to 2011, when lawsuits started to be filed against their activists, accusing them of distribution of extremist material. The discrimination against Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia increased significantly in 2017. At first, on March 23, 2017, the Russian Ministry of Justice suspended the operation of the Administrative Center of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, accusing it of extremism, and on April 20, 2017, the Supreme Court of the RF concurred with the administrative claim of the Ministry of Justice of the RF to recognize this religious organization as extremist, ban its operation and liquidate it. Not only was the Administrative Center of

¹⁹ Звіт про свободу віросповідання у світі за 2020 рік: Україна [Report on International Religious Freedom for 2020: Ukraine]. *Офіс з міжнародних релігійних свобод Державного Департаменту США*. <https://ua.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/151/2020-IRFR-Ukr.pdf>. С. 24-26. Accessed 02.05.2022.

²⁰ Звіт про свободу віросповідання у світі за 2020 рік: Україна [Report on International Religious Freedom for 2020: Ukraine]. *Офіс з міжнародних релігійних свобод Державного Департаменту США*. <https://ua.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/151/2020-IRFR-Ukr.pdf>. С. 19-20. Accessed 02.05.2022.

Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia liquidated by this decision of the Supreme Court, but also 395 local centers of this organization.²¹

The fighters against the “sectarian threat” were greatly pleased with such decisions of the authorities. In particular, the Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religions and Sects (RACSRC), headed by Alexander Dvorkin and operating under the patronage of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), stated on April 24, 2017: “We consider the court’s decision as a natural act of justice, humanity and good will of the state aimed at protecting human rights and improving the social and political situation in our country... After all, the organization of Jehovahists was distinguished for its hostile attitude towards Russia, our people and our traditions... The methods of suppressing the will of people and outright mental manipulation used by this organization, similar to those used by terrorist organizations, pose a particular danger... Like all totalitarian sects, Jehovah’s Witnesses carried out hostile activities against the institution of family, deprived people of their property, destroyed the traditional values inherent in our society, replacing them with their own, purely sectarian ones.”²²

As noted by Nataliia Ishchuk, such an assessment is in line with the official position of the ROC, whose social doctrine persistently outlines the mission of counteracting the activities of various pseudo-religious structures, which, according to the hierarchs of the Orthodox Church, pose a danger to individuals and society.²³ It is worth mentioning that none of the so-called fighters against sectarianism has yet suggested clear criteria for the destructiveness of religious organizations. We believe that the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia is one indication of a wider rejection of the policy of prioritizing the protection of human rights and strengthening of authoritarian governance by the authorities in this country. Furthermore, the ROC has now de facto become the official church in the RF and, therefore, its influence on public policy has grown significantly. The Orthodox Christians see Jehovah’s Witnesses as heretics and religious rivals and use the state as a tool in the fight against them. The use of overly broad and vague criteria used to determine the degree of unconventionality or novelty of a certain religion and, consequently, its level of social danger, in our opinion, has quite

²¹ Верховный суд РФ ликвидировал российское отделение “Свидетелей Иеговы”. Организация признана экстремистской, ее деятельность в России запрещена [The Supreme Court of the Russian Federation liquidated the Russian branch of Jehovah's Witnesses. The organization is recognized as extremist, its activities are prohibited in Russia]. *Интерфакс*. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/559318>. Accessed 02.04.2022.

²² Сектоведы назвали запрет “Свидетелей Иеговы” актом справедливости и гуманности [Sectologists called the ban on Jehovah's Witnesses an act of justice and humanity]. *Интерфакс*. <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/559742>. Accessed 02.04.2022.

²³ Н. В. Іщук. Соціальна адаптація православ'я: філософський аналіз [Ishchuk N.V. Social adaptation of Orthodoxy: Philosophical analysis]. *Дисертація на здобуття наукового ступеня кандидата філософських наук*. – К.: НАУ, 2007. С. 151.

controversial consequences. To “prove” the danger and destructiveness of non-traditional religious organizations, the reference is usually made to criminal manifestations in the activities of some of their adherents or to the social problems inherent in any society, primarily the manipulation of consciousness and family problems. We agree that the practice of manipulating consciousness is common in these communities. However, let us ask ourselves a question – Isn’t manipulation used everywhere? In fact, manipulative techniques are often used in politics, business, and even in family relationships, which can lead to interpersonal alienation, loneliness, depression, etc. Therefore, the accusation of Jehovah’s Witnesses that their activities are destructive because they pose a threat to the mental state of the individual, destroy families, and traditional values, in our opinion, is excessive.

The decision of the Supreme Court of the RF of April 20, 2017, opened a Pandora’s box for the criminal prosecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia. According to the Memorial Human Rights Center (HRC), as of December 27, 2021, 566 Jehovah’s Witnesses were prosecuted under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the RF (“Organization of the activities of a religious organization in respect of which a decision on liquidation was made in connection with the implementation of extremist activities,” a penal measure with sentences of up to 10 years in prison). A total of 618 Jehovah’s Witnesses were persecuted. According to the information of Memorial HRC “at least 80 Jehovah’s Witnesses are in custody; 35 sentenced to jail time; 45 held in pre-trial detention centers awaiting sentencing; at least 31 under house arrest awaiting sentencing; 94 received conditional sentence; at least 360 persecuted without imprisonment.”²⁴ It is fair to note that there has been some encouraging news in recent months. On October 28, 2021, the Plenum of the Supreme Court of the RF decided that the worship services of Jehovah’s Witnesses did not constitute a crime under Art. 282.2 of the Criminal Code of the RF, despite the ban on this organization.²⁵ After that, there were two court decisions in the RF, both of which dropped the extremism charges against Jehovah’s Witnesses. Unfortunately, the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia still continues; they are not allowed to carry out missionary work, their arrests persist, their houses searched, etc.²⁶

²⁴ Список преследуемых по обвинению в принадлежности к свидетелям Иеговы [List of those prosecuted on charges of belonging to Jehovah's Witnesses]. *Правозащитный центр Мемориал*. <https://memohrc.org/ru/special-projects/spisok-presleduemyh-po-obvineniyu-v-prinadlezhnosti-k-svidetelyam-iegovy>. Accessed 02.04.2022.

²⁵ Russian Supreme Court Rules Jehovah's Witnesses Should Not Be Prosecuted for Joint Worship. *Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia*. <https://www.jw-russia.org/news/2021/11/151413.html>. Accessed 02.04.2022.

²⁶ *Официальный сайт Свидетелей Иеговы в России*. [Official website of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia]. <https://jw-russia.org/>. Accessed 02.04.2022.

In Crimea, which the Russian government has illegally declared its territory, Jehovah's Witnesses have been banned since 2017 and many have been prosecuted on charges of extremism. Starting in 2020, according to a report by the Crimean Human Rights Group (CHRG), the first court sentences of imprisonment were given to Jehovah's Witnesses. As of the end of November 2021, five people were imprisoned as part of the persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea. Another nine people were restricted of movement: seven are under house arrest and two are under travel restrictions. The CHRG sees this litigation as religious persecution and a violation of the right to freedom of religion.²⁷ It should be noted that under international law, Russia has no right to apply its criminal law in the occupied territories and to prosecute individuals who are not criminals under Ukrainian law. Such actions constitute a war crime under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.

In contrast to this, Ukraine looks like a truly free country, where the rights and freedoms of citizens, including the religious ones, are not only declared, but also implemented. In this regard, Ukraine differs significantly from many post-Soviet countries, where the activities of religious communities, especially non-traditional ones, are significantly restricted or even banned. In particular, the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses are restricted in Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Kazakhstan. Their activities are totally banned in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and, as we mentioned above, since 2017 in Russia. Therefore, it is not surprising that the curtailment of human rights to freedom of conscience and religious beliefs began rather quickly in those territories of Ukraine, where the so-called "Russian world" has temporarily spread.

In contrast, the situation in modern Ukraine, unlike most post-Soviet countries, is characterized by a mild influence of initiatives that restrict religious freedom. The activity of representatives of traditional churches directed against the Jehovahists and other non-traditional religions manifests itself mainly in propaganda campaigns. The numerous attempts to introduce discriminatory amendments regarding the non-traditional religions in the Law of Ukraine "On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" have been unsuccessful and this Law is still in effect without significant changes and amendments. In our opinion, this position of the state is justified.

²⁷ Преследование "Свидетелей Иеговы" в Крыму: лишено свободы 5 человек [Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Crimea: 5 people imprisoned]. *Крымская правозащитная группа*. <https://crimeahrg.org/ru/presledovanie-svidetelej-iegovy-v-krymu-lisheno-svobody-5-chelovek/>. Accessed 02.04.2022.

We are convinced that unjustified generalizations should not be used in relation to non-traditional religious communities. All religions are different with respect to their position on government authority: some religious movements are really hostile to the state, others (including adherents of Jehovahism) tolerate it as an unavoidable evil, and still others are focused on interaction with it. In terms of their organizational characteristics, Jehovah's Witnesses communities are open structures that unite their followers on a voluntary basis, without restrictions on gender, age, nationality, or religion. The vast majority of Jehovah's Witnesses are law-abiding citizens. Their position on issues that contradict their religious beliefs (refusal to carry weapons, participate in political life, etc.), allows them to be characterized as pacifists and moderate escapists but by no means as extremists. Most of Jehovah's Witnesses social projects have a strong missionary focus, as well as a certain economic component. However, it is unfair to blame them for this since any organization needs new members and material resources to maintain its own existence.

Conclusions

Unlike many post-Soviet countries, Ukraine consistently ensures the implementation of religious freedoms in practice. In particular, the activities of the Jehovahists and other non-traditional religious communities are rarely hindered by the state institutions, which in general have a positive effect on the religious and political environment in our country. The conflicts between Jehovah's Witnesses on the one side and local government institutions, other religious organizations and individual citizens on the other side are not systemic in Ukraine. There are exceptions, such as when some adherents of other religious movements actively oppose the missionary work of Jehovah's Witnesses or damage their religious buildings. In general, however, there are no complaints about religious freedom violations against our country from domestic human rights activists or foreign observers, who in recent years have hardly received any complaints about forced conversion to a different religion. Thus, figuratively speaking, freedom of religion in Ukraine withstands the “litmus test” for non-traditional religions and, in particular, Jehovahism, and this “litmus paper” does not change its colors into “threatening” ones.

We believe that the claims of social harm of religious communities should be approached with caution, observing the principles of religious tolerance and the rule of law, and the religious activities of communities should be restricted only if they violate the current legislation and cause harm to the physical and mental health of citizens. In our opinion, if the activities of members of non-traditional religious communities do not threaten public order and show no signs of criminal and other offenses, then the state law enforcement authorities should

not interfere in these activities, and the state should guarantee its citizens the right to freedom of conscience, religious beliefs and religious activities.

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